COMMEMORATING THE FIRST SHOT OF WORLD WAR 1
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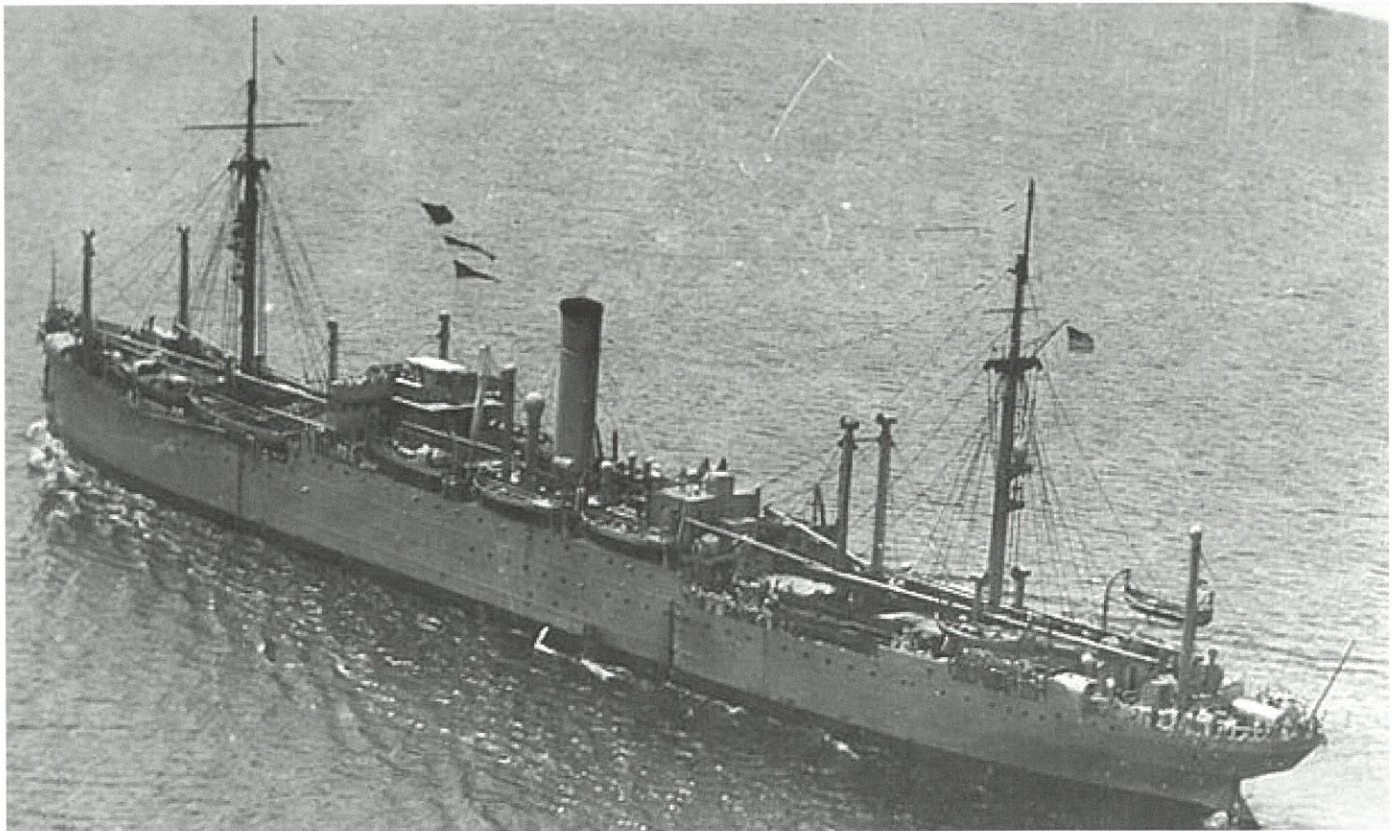
Introduction

Between 2014 and 2018, Australia will commemorate the Centenary of the First World War, marking 100 years since our nation's involvement in the world's first global conflict.

At 12:45 pm on Tuesday 5 August 2014, a single shot was fired at Point Nepean on the Mornington Peninsula to mark the centenary of a remarkable and defining moment in our nation's history – the first shot fired in anger in the British Empire at the start of World War One.

The first shot of World War 1

The first shot of the British Empire was fired from Coastal Artillery Gun Emplacement No. 6 located at Fort Nepean, Portsea on 5th August 1914 at 12:45 pm, just 3 hours 45 minutes after war was declared in London. The shot was fired in order to prevent the German merchant vessel SS Pfalz from escaping Port Phillip to the open sea. The shot was successful – the Pfalz surrendered.

Of all the hundreds of millions of rounds of all calibres that were subsequently fired over the next four years and four months, until war ended on 11th November 1918, by the member nations of the British Empire, in a war whose grim ferocity consumed and affected so very many Australian lives, it is acknowledged that the shot fired from Fort Nepean was the very first.

The German Frieghter SS Pfalz. After her capture she was renamed Boorara and served as a transport ship along with eleven other German ships which happened to be in Australian Ports at the beginning of the War and were confiscated. She was sold off in 1926.

Attempted escape by the SS Pfalz

On the morning of Wednesday 5th August 1914, the German freighter S.S. Pfalz, under the command of Captain Wilhelm Kuhlken, was desperately trying to escape from Port Phillip Bay before a conflict that was regarded as inevitable, actually commenced.

War had been declared at 11 pm on Tuesday 4 August 1914 (London time) – 9 am on Wednesday 5 August (Melbourne time) – and occurred whilst the SS Pfalz was steaming as quickly as possible towards Port Phillip Heads and the

freedom its Captain and crew so keenly desired.

At about 12.40 pm (Melbourne time), the Pfalz was just short of the Heads, having been released from RAN inspection near Portsea, when news reached Fort Queenscliff that war had been declared. The Artillery HQ at Fort Queenscliff controlled the coastal batteries at Forts Nepean, Pearce and Queenscliff, and ordered Fort Nepean by telephone and heliograph to stop the Pfalz.

An initial flag signal from Fort Nepean for the ship to "heave to" went unheeded and the Pfalz continued to steam towards the Heads, which were now tantalisingly close. Because of this, the order was given for a shot to be fired across its bows.

And so it was that, at about 12.45 pm on Wednesday 5 August 1914, Lieutenant-Colonel Sandford at Fort Queenscliff gave an order to Lieutenant C Morris, the Fire Commander at Fort Nepean, to "stop her or sink her" and a 100 lb Practice 6" round was fired from Gun Emplacement No 6. The shot worked and after a brief struggle on the bridge between the German Captain and the Australian pilot (Captain Robinson), Captain Kuhlken surrendered and the Pfalz was taken into captivity. The German crew men spent the rest of the war in an internment camp.

Commemoration of the First Shot

On Tuesday, 5 August 2014, about a thousand people gathered at the parade ground of the former Officer Cadet School, Point Nepean, Portsea to commemorate the anniversary of the first shot fired in the British Empire in the First World War. Four hundred people also gathered at Fort Queenscliff on the other side of the Port Philip Bay.

The 2nd/10th Light Battery of 5th/6th Battalion, the Royal Victoria Regiment had the honour of firing one 16oz blank cartridge from an M2A2 Howitzer gun at 12:45pm (AEST) to replicate the precise time the shot was fired 100 years ago. The Gun Position Officer for the event was Captain Reed Powney and the Detachment Commander was Bombardier Ian Johnson. Descendants of the first shot participants later laid wreaths at the service.

The Commemoration was supported by the Federal Government, the Victorian State Government and the Mornington Peninsula Shire Council. In particular, the Commemoration was supported by the Department of the Premier and Cabinet, Parks Victoria, the ADF Federation Guard and the Sorrento-Portsea RSL who all had representatives on the organising committee.

Fort Nepean today

Fort Nepean was a critical part of Victoria's defences from the 1878 until 1948. It was the largest and most heavily armed installation in the network of fortifications around the entrance to Port Phillip, and today remains an outstanding example of the evolution of gun technology and Australia's early defence strategies.

To coincide with the anniversary, the Victorian State Government, through Parks Victoria and Veterans' Affairs, has completed the first stage of a $350,000 visitor experience improvement program at Point Nepean that will ensure that the record of our military history is not lost, and provide new ways for current and future generations to connect with this special place. It has also enhanced the prominence of Gun Emplacement No. 6 to fully appreciate and commemorate its role in Australia's First World War history.

About the Author

Major Garry Rolfe was born in Maidstone, Kent England and enlisted in the 2nd/15th Field Regiment as a Gunner in 1978 while studying Primary Teaching. He was commissioned in 2005. His first posting was to the Monash University Regiment in Mt Waverley as Training Officer and SI of the Specialist Services Officer Basic Course. During his 36 year career the majority of his regimental appointments including Forward Observer, Battery Captain and Battery Commander were within the 2nd/10th Medium Regiment and later 2nd/10th Field Regiment. He was awarded a Conspicuous Service Cross for his service as Battery Sergeant Major in 2003. He was selected to command 2/10 Light Battery (Mortars) in January 2013 on transition to 5th/6th Battalion Royal Victoria Regiment under Army's Plan Beersheba.